

Initiative aims to battle intrusive English ivy on Mercer Island

By Natalie Singer
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English ivy is invading Mercer Island, and a grass-roots proposal to fight back has created a stir.

The noxious weed is crawling up trees, snaking underfoot and choking out some of the lush island's most stunning greenery.

The ivy, a common invasive species in wet, forested regions, has pushed a small group of crusaders to lead an initiative drive to raise island property taxes by \$1.25 million a year to pay for eradication on public property.

If voters agree to give ivy the ax, the City Council would be forced to raise property taxes by about 15 percent - the largest single increase in the city's history, according to City Manager Rich Conrad. The tax would surpass the city's entire administration budget - \$1.1 million - which pays for the city attorney, city manager and City Council.

"In 50 or 100 years, this place won't look the same unless someone does something now," said Rita Moore, a member of the initiative committee and the island's volunteer Ivy Brigade, which has battled the weeds for more than a decade.

"We're trying shock and awe on the ivy," said former City Councilwoman Marguerite Sutherland, who likened the ivy and other similar invasive species to "terrorists."

English ivy is indeed a big problem around the Puget Sound region, said Steve Burke, coordinator for King County's noxious-weed program. The woody evergreen perennial can grow for nine or 10 months of the year and reach more than 90 feet long. It must be eradicated by hand, and the oldest reported plant lived longer than 400 years.

But not everyone on Mercer Island is so sure all that money is necessary.

"It's an awful lot," said Glenn Boettcher, the city's maintenance director. He said the city already is spending \$100,000 this year on urban forest management, which includes an increased focus on non-native plant removal in the island's parks, open spaces and public right-of-way.

"What Mercer Island is investing is (already) pretty substantial," he said. "It's the right proportion with all the other things our community needs."

Along many island roads, ivy's clutch on the forest is easy to spot. Towering tree trunks are wrapped, cocoon-like, in the glossy green vines; piles of twisting ivy shrubs carpet the ground.

"Ivy becomes established in the forest system," choking out undergrowth and climbing to the treetops, Burke said.

It can shade foliage, deprive bark of air, add thousands of pounds of weight to its host, accelerate rot and eventually kill trees. It only takes a few years before a wisp of ivy can turn into a serious threat, Burke said.

King County lists English ivy as a "weed of concern" and discourages its use, but control is not required by law. Other volunteer groups have cleared ivy in Seattle and elsewhere, but the Mercer Island group says the problem has gone beyond what a handful of volunteers can do.

The 10-year levy, if passed, would cost the owner of a \$500,000 home about \$100 a year. Thirty percent of the funds raised would go to the acquisition of open space and the building of new trails. The other 70 percent, about \$875,000 a year, would pay to remove non-native invasive plants - mostly English ivy - replant native species and educate residents about how to protect their own private property from the pernicious plant.

The petitioners will have to gather at least 2,500 signatures to get on the November ballot, where it would sit beside another parks request to pay for maintenance of King County's recent castoff, Luther Burbank Park.

The City Council also is searching for several million dollars to help replace the island's aging community center.

Nevertheless, the ivy committee is betting that islanders will think \$1.25 million is a good investment in the future.

"When you show people the petition and say ivy, they go, 'ah,' " said committee member Virginia Arnon. "And then they sign."

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(Picture missing)

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Marguerite Sutherland, left, and Virginia Arnon stand next to an ivy-covered tree on East Mercer Way on Mercer Island. The women are part of an initiative drive to raise island property taxes by \$1.25 million a year to eradicate the ivy on public property.

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Ivy stems on a tree at Secret Park on Mercer Island have withered because the plant has been cut from its roots.

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